“I always loved big adventure stories—the specific kind of adventure story where explorers find a hidden world that was heretofore unknown to them or anybody else.”

~ Don Hall, “Strange World” Director

ADVANCE

The breathtaking settings for Walt Disney Animation Studios’ films can be fantastical and awe-inspiring, inviting us to places only seen in our imaginations—from Zootopia to San Fransokyo, Arendelle to the 8-bit arcade, Kumandra to Corona. But no world has ever been so wonderfully strange as the studio’s latest adventure. Journey deep into “Strange World,” set in a vast, hidden, subterranean world where bizarre creatures, looming danger and points unknown await.

Walt Disney Animation Studios’ original action-packed adventure “Strange World” introduces a legendary family of explorers, the Clades, as they attempt to navigate an uncharted, treacherous land alongside a motley crew that includes a mischievous blob, a three-legged dog and a slew of ravenous creatures. This seriously strange world is actually an allegory for Planet Earth, says director Don Hall. “What started everything was just thinking about my sons and the world they’re going to inherit,” he says. “How is it different from what I inherited from my dad?”

Hall leaned into the idea of fathers and sons—how they don’t always see the world the same way. “My dad and I have a great relationship,” he says. “He is a farmer and I grew up helping out. But when I was 14 years old, it all changed. Suddenly, I was planting and doing more high-level stuff that I just didn’t want to do. It wasn’t me. It all turned out fine, but I always remembered that and thought it would be interesting to explore father/son relationships and the kind of expectations we put on our kids—intentionally or unintentionally.”

At its core, “Strange World” is a story about family, specifically three generations who each are seeking their place in the world. Searcher Clade is a brilliant family man—who, as a teenager, discovered a plant-based power source that changed the world. He built a successful enterprise growing, harvesting and distributing the crop alongside his wife and

son. Searcher's dad, Jaeger, set out at a young age to be the kind of explorer legends are made of. A statue in town confirms he achieved his goal, but lost during an expedition, nobody's heard from him in decades. Searcher's son, Ethan, is a happy 16-year-old with a great sense of humor and a decent work ethic (for a teenager). Ethan helps on the farm, but he's not sure he wants to follow in his father's footsteps. The three Clades have huge differences that prove divisive—and at the same time, they have more in common than any of them is willing to admit. Co-director and writer Qui Nguyen recalls early conversations with Hall about the story. "The thing that got me was when he said it's about fathers and sons," says Nguyen. "I am also a dad of two kids and I felt like that was exactly what I wanted to be doing. This is a story I needed and wanted to tell.

"We could relate to Jaeger and Searcher when it comes to our kids," continued Nguyen. "There's a push and pull between ambition and just being a dad. It's something almost every artist here at Disney—anyone who's chasing a big dream—would understand. A big reason why we do it is for them—and, man, we don't want to lose focus of that. This is the story that I'm going through, the story that Don is going through and the story our characters are going through."

Producer Roy Conli says the dynamic between the characters is the heart of the story. "Father-son relationships are so beautiful and so fraught simultaneously," he says. "I came from the theater. My favorite play as a kid was 'Death of a Salesman,' which is a classic father-son tale. My father and I had an amazing relationship. I thought he was Superman until I was 15, when I realized he wasn't Superman. We had a good 10 years of battle that fortunately, we came through. He was an amazing guy, and that father-son relationship is really special: it's phenomenal and universal. I think fathers push their sons; sons reject their fathers, and then eventually they all come around."

"Strange World" is an original action-packed comedy adventure in the spirit of pulp novels. "I always loved big adventure stories," says Hall, "the specific kind of adventure story where explorers find a hidden world that was heretofore unknown to them or anybody else. And that goes back so far into late 1800s, early 1900s—Jules Verne, H.G. Wells, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. That was sort of the birth of the big adventure story in novel form. 'King Kong' is a good filmic reference that had a group of explorers find a new hidden world. I wanted to evoke that in this movie."

The big adventure within the story of the Clades kicks off when the president of Avalonia, Callisto Mal, shows up at Searcher's farm—much to his surprise and that of his wife, Meridian. The news isn't good: pando—the revolutionary plant Searcher discovered years before—is in trouble, and they're all in grave danger. They need to trek to the source, wherever that is, to figure out how to save it. Says Conli, "I often think of pando impacting Avalonia the same way the advent of electricity impacted our world. If you look at the 1880s and shoot forward into the 1930s, it was a completely different world because electricity was this phenomenal force. When they discover that it's in peril, that drives the action of the film. Pando becomes the reason for the expedition that leads Searcher back to his father, Jaeger, who's been missing for many years."

Their journey takes them into a world nobody knew existed, where they'll encounter a bevy of never-before-seen creatures—some weird, some wonderful and some downright dangerous. But the biggest discovery that awaits the Clades is the key to their relationship with each other and what the future holds for them if they find it.

“Strange World” features the voices of Jake Gyllenhaal as Searcher Clade, a family man who finds himself out of his element on an unpredictable mission; Dennis Quaid as Searcher’s larger-than-life explorer father, Jaeger; Jaboukie Young-White as Searcher’s 16-year-old son, Ethan, who longs for adventure; Gabrielle Union as Meridian Clade, an accomplished pilot and Searcher’s partner in all things; and Lucy Liu as Callisto Mal, Avalonia’s fearless leader who spearheads the exploration into the strange world. Helmed by director Don Hall (Oscar®-winning “Big Hero 6,” “Raya and the Last Dragon”) and co-director/writer Qui Nguyen (co-writer “Raya and the Last Dragon”), and produced by Roy Conli (Oscar®-winning “Big Hero 6,” “Tangled”), “Strange World” ventures to the big screen on Nov. 23, 2022.

WHO’S WHO IN “STRANGE WORLD”

Creating the Clades with Comic Inspiration and Talented Voice Cast

The character lineup in “Strange World” includes three generation of Clades plus two strong women who not only witness the journey but actually navigate it. Director Don Hall, who’d just wrapped “Raya and the Last Dragon” with its more realistic-looking cast of characters, wanted to do something different. “I love French and Belgian comics,” he says. “And stylistically, it felt like a fun thing to pull into our Disney world that hadn’t quite been done. It dovetailed pretty well with this idea of the pulp adventure concept. So, we married those two styles together.”

To help bring the characters to life, filmmakers enlisted the talents of familiar performers who stepped into unfamiliar roles. “This cast reflects the pure and very clear vision of Don and [co-director] Qui [Nguyen],” says Jamie Sparer Roberts, who headed up casting. “It's diverse, inclusive and full of uniquely talented individuals who all bring more to their characters than what is written on the page. It was very important to the directors to find actors who had the ability to collaborate, improvise and bring ideas to the table. They are all thinkers who really understand their craft/acting. Because of this, the characters are relatable and grounded.”

SEARCHER CLADE is a treasured member of the Avalonia community having discovered a revolutionary plant-based power source called pando. These days, he farms the plant, providing energy to the entire community. Above all though, Searcher is a family man: he loves a spontaneous middle-of-the-kitchen dance with his wife, Meridian, and he vowed long ago that he would do anything for his son, Ethan. Searcher has worked hard to create a solid and secure life for his family, so when he finds himself out of his element on an unpredictable mission, his cool confidence escapes him. Says Hall, “I have teenage sons and an older father. I understand Searcher’s point of view because that’s where I am right now in my life.”

Searcher stepped out of the shadow of his adventurous father to create his own path—interestingly, they both have statues in Avalonia that honor their successes. “Searcher is caught between the legacy of the greatest explorer of all time and his own legacy he established almost in contrast to that of his father, who he sees as a rambling, intrepid explorer who was never home,” says Hall. “Searcher set out to be the opposite. He’s rooted in his family.”

Jake Gyllenhaal lends his voice to Searcher. “I think he approaches everything through a deep understanding of the story,” says Hall. “He comes at it from an emotional place first. He

understood very early on where Searcher was coming from emotionally. But he was good at situational stuff, too. We could describe a scene, 'you're running from a giant, tentacled monster,' and he was able to take that leap of imagination and do versions that were fun and funny. He brought a lot of humor to Searcher and the animators fed off of it."

JAEGER CLADE is Searcher's larger-than-life explorer father. He has long dreamed of venturing beyond the mountain ranges that surround Avalonia. His dream became an obsession he never lost sight of—even when a major misstep landed him in a strange world far from his family. The one-and-only Jaeger just wants to leave a legacy. "Jaeger is our pulp hero," says co-director/writer Qui Nguyen. "He's like one of those guys on the covers who wear white shirts that were ripped fighting an alligator. He is an awesome character. But what if that guy was your dad? That seems way less awesome.

"We wanted to push him as big and boisterous as he could be," continued Nguyen. "And we needed a legend to play him. Dennis Quaid has had a giant career and he's also a musician—the lead singer in his own band. That kind of big personality that can rock a crowd is Jaeger. It's a ride every time we're in the recording studio with Dennis."

ETHAN CLADE is a typical teenager who rolls his eyes when his parents smooch, lights up when his friends visit and gets completely tongue-tied when his crush, Diazo, is around. The 16-year-old longs for the kind of adventure that echoes that of the grandfather he's never met, so when his dad heads off on a crucial mission aboard the airship Venture—Ethan stows away. According to producer Roy Conli, Ethan has a healthy relationship with his dad, but they have different ideas of what the future may hold for Ethan. "He certainly embraces his father and can feel the love that Searcher has for him, but something is missing for him in the quiet farm life he's living."

Ethan is voiced by Jaboukie Young-White, who came from the world of stand-up comedy and brought his improvisational skills to the recording booth. "We love having the actors adlib, and Jaboukie can do that all day long," says Hall. "He's got that kind of youthful enthusiasm, and he brought a lot of warmth to Ethan, which is a tough job with a teenage character. What he did with Ethan is pretty remarkable."

MERIDIAN CLADE expertly pilots the crop duster that helps their pando crops thrive. She's the kind of person who finds the fun in any situation, and she adores her husband and son. "Meridian loves flying, and their farm is her life and livelihood just as much as it's Searcher's," says head of story Lissa Treiman. Strong, observant and just plain cool, Meridian is an unexpected-but-invaluable addition to the Clade family expedition having chased down the Venture after realizing that Ethan sneaked aboard.

The bigger-than-life situation showcases a confidence and capability in Meridian that Jamie Sparer Roberts, who spearheaded casting, recognized in Gabrielle Union, who voices the funny and fierce character. "Gabrielle has strength, courage, humor, intelligence and experience," says Roberts. "Her voice is smooth and she's so confident. She can say something with one word and send a message that most people need a paragraph to transmit."

CALLISTO MAL, president of Avalonia, has a long history with the Clade family. Once a member of Jaeger's expedition team, Callisto ultimately followed a different path. She's determined to solve the mystery of what is plaguing pando, becoming the driving force behind the mission to the strange world. "I think she's a good leader," says head of story Lissa Treiman. "She has the confidence to make decisions, but she's thoughtful and able to see things from a human perspective." Filmmakers aimed to create a character who was equally as brave and physically capable as Jaeger, but less self-absorbed. "She's almost the opposite of Jaeger," says co-director/writer Qui Nguyen. "She's not about her own legacy or legend. She's there for the people of Avalonia."

Lucy Liu impressed filmmakers with her own unique interpretation of the character: "Lucy came in and started to go big and boisterous with her performance," says Hall. "Qui and I loved it and thought it really added a sort of spice to the movie."

SPLAT is a blue blobby creature from the strange world who befriends Ethan and guides him and the rest of the Clades through the mysterious underground land. With an overabundance of personality but a lack of facial features, filmmakers were challenged to make Splat an emotive character. "There's a lot in the timing and posing of the character that sells the emotion—you almost think of it like a puppet," says head of animation Amy Smeed.

LEGEND is the Clades' three-legged, perpetually happy family dog who unknowingly loves charging towards danger. When Ethan sneakily signs on for the mission to the strange world, his loyal companion remains by his side, eager as ever to please his human. However, his presence—and instinct to naively and energetically greet every stranger—may do more harm than good.

Hall credits Burny Mattinson, a storyboard artist who's been at Disney Animation since 1953, with the idea for Legend. "He kept telling me the movie needed a dog," says Hall. "Dogs just scream family, and 'Strange World' is about family. I decided to name the dog Legend because that's what I call Burny."

Mattinson became an official Disney Legend in 2008, which earned him the esteemed nickname.

MAKING THE WORLD STRANGE

Filmmakers Lean into the Weird, Fun and Delightfully Warped World

Given the title "Strange World," the look of the film could be nothing less than extraordinary, and the artists at Walt Disney Animation Studios were determined to create something unexpected and awe-inspiring for audiences. They started with pulp fiction—magazines that were published from 1896 to the late 1950s and were so named due to the cheap wood pulp paper on which the magazines were printed. Says associate production designer Justin Cram, "We all had fun designing the different parts of the strange world, taking inspiration from those old book covers. "Seeing what they thought the future might look like back in that era, whether it was spaceships or aliens. It was a great jumping-off point."

The team actually crafted three distinctive looks and color palettes: the city of Avalonia, the Clade's family farm and the strange world.

- For Avalonia, artists play up warm colors, such as white, orange and red. "We wanted to create a kind of utopia—a warm, nostalgic feeling to emphasize that this is a wonderful culture that everybody enjoys," says Cram. Avalonia is featured in both pre-pando and post-pando times. Adds production designer Merhrdad Isvandi, "We show how the city went from single-story buildings to 100-story buildings."
- On the Clade family farm, cool colors—such as lush greens and blues—dominate the landscape. "I was looking at old Kodachrome images from the '30s and '40s and trying to connect emotionally because it's really about the close relationship between Searcher, Ethan and Meridian," says Cram. "We wanted to make it feel timeless and make it really about the idea of hearth and home."
- In the midst of an important mission, the Clades stumble upon a hidden world that is like nothing they've ever seen before. In the strange world, those cool colors from Searcher's farm are used sparingly, says Isvandi. "When we get to the strange world, we don't have any greens except pando," he says. "We reserved green for pando, and we got away from blue in the sky. Our brain is adjusted to seeing blue skies. Removing that option and thinking of something else to make the image beautiful was an exciting challenge throughout production."

The environments and creatures within the strange world are so unusual and striking that filmmakers had to be careful not to distract from the main characters at the heart of the film. "If we were looking at specific shots thinking, 'This world is so amazing and so beautiful, but it compromises a moment between characters,' then we would pull back," says Cram. "It's most important to honor those relationships within the scene. But there are times when the characters are astonished by what they're seeing. That's when we can really show off this wonderous environment."

FILMMAKER BIOGRAPHIES

DON HALL (Director) began his career at Walt Disney Animation Studios in June 1995 as a story apprentice on "Tarzan." He served as a story artist on several development projects and productions, including "The Emperor's New Groove" and "Chicken Little" before becoming head of story for "Meet the Robinsons" and "The Princess and the Frog."

Hall made his directorial debut for Disney Animation's "Winnie the Pooh" and went on to direct "Big Hero 6," which won an Academy Award® for best animated feature film. He then served as co-director on "Moana" and worked on several development projects before his role as director on "Raya and the Last Dragon."

Hall graduated with a BFA in drawing and painting from the University of Iowa and a BFA in character animation from California Institute of the Arts. After graduating from Cal Arts, he returned to the campus as an instructor in advanced story development.

Hall is a native of Glenwood, Iowa, and currently resides in Pasadena with his wife and two children.

QUI NGUYEN (Co-Director/Writer) is a Vietnamese-American playwright and screenwriter, who previously wrote with Adele Lim the Academy Award®-nominated Walt Disney Animation Studios feature, “Raya and the Last Dragon.”

Known for his shows “Vietgone” and “She Kills Monsters,” Nguyen is an alumnus of Marvel Studios Writers Program and has also written for “Dispatches from Elsewhere,” “The Society,” “Incorporated” and “Peg+Cat,” for which he received a 2016 Daytime Emmy. He is also a co-founder of Vampire Cowboys Theatre Company of New York City—credited for being the “pioneers of geek theatre.”

ROY CONLI (Producer) previously produced Walt Disney Animation Studios’ Oscar®-winning feature “Big Hero 6.” Conli joined Disney Animation in 1993, and after assembling all the creative elements for “The Hunchback of Notre Dame” and launching the project, he relocated to France to oversee the contributions of the Paris-based animation team over the two-year production schedule. Upon completion of the film, he remained in France and guided production on the animated films “Hercules” and “Tarzan.” Conli returned to the studio in Burbank to produce “Treasure Planet” and then served as producer of Disney Animation’s 50th animated film, “Tangled.” He is a member of the executive leadership team for Disney Animation.

Since 2014, Conli has also been a producer for Disneynature films including “Dolphin Reef,” “Elephant,” “Penguins” and “Born in China.” He recently produced three episodes of Disney Animation’s first-ever animated series, “Baymax!” streaming June 29, 2022, on Disney+.

Born and raised in Los Angeles, Calif., Conli studied theater at San Francisco’s prestigious American Conservancy Theater (ACT). A chance meeting with a group of creative talents from the Pasadena Playhouse led Conli to a position with the legendary theater and, ultimately, a four-year stint as director of operations. In that role, he initiated a restoration of the neglected venue and helped guide the theater to its official reopening in 1983.

Conli subsequently moved to Boston where he continued his education at Boston University and eventually earned an Master of Fine Arts degree. After graduation, he served as associate producer for the Camden Shakespeare Festival in Maine. In 1989, Conli joined the production team at the Mark Taper Forum, the leading regional theater in Los Angeles. Over the next four years he managed all special projects and new play development for the Taper, where he helped launch premieres of such award-winning plays as “Angels in America,” “Jelly’s Last Jam” and “The Kentucky Cycle.”

MEHRDAD ISVANDI (Production Designer) began his career at Walt Disney Animation Studios in 2014 in the talent development program. He then went on to work as a visual development artist on “Moana,” “Ralph Breaks the Internet,” and “Raya and the Last Dragon,” helping visualize such iconic moments as the Kakamora barge in “Moana” and the Heart Fortress in “Raya and the Last Dragon.” His latest credit was as the art director, environments, for the Academy Award®-winning film “Encanto.”

As the production designer for “Strange World,” Isvandi led the art team responsible for designing the immersive and unique environments for the film—from the bustling city of Avalonia, to the charming Clade family farm, to the uncharted, treacherous and strange

world. He cites research and imagination as the keys to building out fantastic worlds, featuring a rich history and compelling characters.

His love of incredible worlds first started after seeing “The Lion King” as a child, which led him to his career at Walt Disney Animation Studios. Born in Ahvaz, Iran, Isvandi moved to the United States and attended the Academy of Art.

SEAN JENKINS (Head of Environments) led an incredibly talented team of environment artists as they created the unique settings for “Strange World.”

Jenkins served as the head of environments for “Frozen 2,” and prior to that was the Technical Supervisor for Disney Animation’s Hyperion Renderer. For this project, he guided an accomplished development team as they built an entirely new rendering software to achieve the never-before-possible visuals of Oscar®-winning film "Big Hero 6." Jenkins was also the CG supervisor on "Wreck-It Ralph" where he led a multi-disciplined team of technical directors as they stewarded the technical aspects of the production. In addition, Jenkins was responsible for overseeing the creation of uniquely stylized crowds to populate the film's diverse worlds.

Among his other accomplishments, Jenkins helped oversee the final look of the ocean water in Disney Animation's "Moana" as the water finaling lead and architect the process of animating over 70 feet of magical hair as the hair process lead on "Tangled." In his role as look and render supervisor on "Bolt,” he led the development of the rich look for the feature's many characters and environments. He then had the opportunity to see these assets through to their final rendered images.

Before joining the Walt Disney Animation Studios, Jenkins contributed to the research and development teams on a number of visual effects productions for such ambitious Disney and Touchstone Pictures releases as “Armageddon,” “Mighty Joe Young” and “Reign of Fire.”

With degrees in electrical engineering and computer science, Jenkins holds multiple patents in filmmaking techniques and is a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. He recently was promoted to VP, craft leadership at Disney Animation, where he will focus on leading the craft vision across the studio.

AMY SMEED (Head of Animation) began her professional career at Walt Disney Animation Studios in 1998, working as an assistant (in the scene set-up department) on the production of “Dinosaur,” and went on to become an animator in 2004 on “Chicken Little” (2005). Since then, she has served as head of animation on the Oscar®-nominated films “Moana” and “Raya and the Last Dragon.” She also animated on “Meet the Robinsons,” “Bolt,” “Tangled,” “Wreck-It Ralph,” the Oscar®-winning “Frozen,” and “Ralph Breaks the Internet.”

Smeed’s animation of the character Rapunzel for “Tangled” earned a VES Award nomination for outstanding animated character in an animated motion picture. Her other Disney Animation credits include work on the theme park attraction “Mickey’s Philharmagic” and on both of the award-winning “Prep & Landing” TV specials.

Born and raised in Royal Oak, Mich., Smeed attended Western Michigan University for three years, before going on to receive her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1997. Her dreams of becoming a painter and animator led her to seek work in the animation industry and to her current job leading a team of animators for Disney Animation.

Working at the Disney has provided her with several opportunities to collaborate with her husband, Tony Smeed, who served as animation supervisor for “Zootopia” and head of animation on “Frozen 2.” The couple met during the production of “Dinosaur,” and have a daughter.

JUSTIN SKLAR (Head of Animation) joined Walt Disney Animation Studios in 2011 after graduating from Ringling College of Art and Design with a degree in animation. During his junior year at Ringling, he came to Burbank, Calif., to work as a summer animation trainee at Disney Animation, where he and his fellow trainees completed a short film called “Chalk.”

Born in Baltimore, Md., and raised in nearby Owings Mills, Sklar went to George Washington Carver Center for arts and technology, a magnet school for gifted and talented students, where he took an intensive art program. Around that time, several of his friends were experimenting with a 3D computer graphics software toolkit called Blender. Driven by an intense desire to understand how the program worked, he became obsessed with it and mastered it. During that time, he also honed his artistic side by drawing massive super realistic charcoal drawings. His love of challenges and puzzle solving led him to pursue a career in animation because he found it hard and interesting.

Hired by Disney Animation as a trainee in 2011, he got his first feature film experience animating crowds for “Wreck-It Ralph.” He was promoted to an animator on “Frozen” and went on to other assignments on “Big Hero 6,” “Zootopia” and “Moana.” In his role as supervising animator on “Ralph Breaks the Internet,” Sklar helped to guide the character of Ralph, and played a key role in creating the “Ralphzilla” character (who was nominated for a VES Award). For “Frozen 2” he worked with the team on the characters of Kristoff and Matthias and on “Raya and the Last Dragon” he supervised the character of Namaari. He observes, “the cool thing about animation is that each movie is like a new puzzle to figure out. It’s changing all the time, and no matter what you’ve done, there’s always something new to learn.”